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Involving school students in social action in America: The Youth Dreamers Group

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Abstract: The following article describes the work and vision of the Youth Dreamers group in Baltimore, which evolved as a result of young people's involvement in the social action process as part of a school community action course run by teacher Kristina Berdan. In the first part, student members of the group, Chekana Reid and Cierra Cary, describe how they identified their key issue, the need for a youth-run youth centre where young people could go after school to take part in a range of constructive activities. Youth Dreamers started to take action to achieve their goals and have been successful in fund-raising and gaining political support and community support for the venture. In the second part, their teacher Kristina Berdan reflects at length on her experience of the social action process, its educational impact on her students, the contrast between the achievements of the Youth Dreamers group and her regular English class and the differences and sometimes contradictions inherent in her two roles of teacher and social action worker.

Key words: education, youth, community, social action, groupwork in schools

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Youth Dreamers: The view from the students

The Youth Dreamers are a group of students in grades seven through eleven who decided that they wanted their voices to be heard. We are part of the Stadium School, a Baltimore City Public School that serves about 115 students in grades four through eight from the communities surrounding Memorial Stadium. When we started in 2001, we met for one hour each day. Now, we meet every Wednesday as part of a full day project class, in the evenings, and on weekends.

Our mission is to decrease the amount of violence that involves youth after school. We read that after school many kids just hang out and participate in unstructured activities. This leads to bad grades, bad attendance at school, drug abuse and bad behavior. Our goal is to try to create a youth-run youth centre where these kids can go instead. Our centre will hopefully decrease the amount of negative acts that our youth are involved in today.

The beginning

The first things we did to reach our dream were to:

- write a pledge to show our commitment;
- write a business proposal for possible funders;
- write a one year operating costs budget;
- complete a letter writing campaign.

We wrote over 40 letters and only received replies from three people. We did not stop, we kept on writing, and for those who did not hear us, we kept on fighting.

Fundraising and grantwriting

Our first funding was from Youth As Resources. We requested \$3000 for furniture for our centre. To our surprise, we were then written into a federal bill by Senator Milkuski earmarking \$70,000 for the creation of our youth-run youth centre. She partnered us with St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center to help us buy the house and

Habitat for Humanity to help us renovate it. Since then we have written many other grant applications and now have over \$180,000 towards our one-year operating costs budget of \$276,000. Even though we were rejected from some of these foundations, we still kept writing and never gave up. We have also run many fundraising events.

All about the Centre

Our youth centre will be run by two adult directors, a Board of Directors that includes youth and adults, up to 23 teenagers in grades seven through twelve, at least eight adult volunteers from the community, Ameri-Corps volunteers, and a janitor. The teenagers will tutor members and teach a variety of classes along with adult volunteers. The centre will include a variety of classes, such as sewing, pottery, mosaics, art, cooking and typing, to name just a few.

Each teenager will commit to working at the centre a certain number of hours each week. They will be paid a small stipend for half of these hours and will earn service-learning hours for the other half. Adult volunteers will get paid a small stipend for their hours. The directors and janitor will get paid a set yearly salary. Finally, we are trying to set up a scholarship fund for Youth Dreamers who serve on the Board of Directors.

Not only will the youth centre serve youth in the community, but it will also serve community members. We will host block parties, open houses, neighbourhood clean-ups and other activities that bring youth and adults together in positive ways. We have been involved in many different publicity events.

This year, four of us went to area elementary schools during the day to work with our future members. We wrote letters to the principals to get permission, and then planned activities and lessons to do with the younger children. Working with younger children is hard, but it pays off in the end.

Four of us also worked with the Baltimore Community Foundation to review proposals for after-school programming in Baltimore. This was a long and hard process, but it gave us a chance to see how proposals are viewed from the 'other side.' We

also ran workshops for other middle school students from the city. We helped them identify problems in their community that they wanted to solve. We will continue to work with them to give them advice and help with their projects.

We have learnt a lot over the past two years. We never realised it would be so much work and take so much time. Some of our biggest challenges were not getting responses, staying on task, being comfortable presenting and staying committed. Most importantly however we have learnt that if we stay committed, we can accomplish a lot by working together. We have become good problem solvers and we know how to reflect on our work to make it better. We even researched becoming a non-profit organization, voted to do it, engaged the help of the University of Maryland Law School, and are now the Stadium School Youth Dreamers, Inc. with a board of seven youth and seven adults.

Reflections on the Youth Dreamers: The cycle of successes and challenges and how social action plays its part

The beginning

I am part of the Youth Dreamers because I want to be a part of making a future for the youth of today. [Mildred]

When nine Baltimore City middle school students decided to create a free standing youth-run youth centre in order to provide a safe and stimulating place for kids after school, I actually encouraged them to pick a smaller project. Although I had done successful community projects with other students and had attended several training courses with the Centre for Social Action, I did not see how students were going to be able to mobilize to raise the money and garner the support to do what no other youth group had done on their own. Having taught many of these students who were so easily frustrated by having to revise a paper, I doubted that they had the staying power to stick it out for the years that it would take to accomplish this task. It took little time for me to realize

that they were going to do exactly that. Through all of their own efforts, the Youth Dreamers are on the road to seeing their dream become a reality.

Back in March of 2001, I could never have predicted how enormous this project would become, nor how much I would struggle with my role as teacher/facilitator. When I announced 'Community Action' as my elective course, I noted a low, collective groan among the students. Only nine courageous souls signed up for the course, choosing to give up the chance to play basketball, football, or African drums. We began by really talking about the issues in their community that bothered them. The students clearly enjoyed being given the opportunity not only to talk in class, but also to talk about 'their' interests, not the interests of the curriculum writers in their district. When asked to focus in on one issue, the students unanimously agreed on the issue of teenagers being on the streets involved in violent activities after school hours. From that point, I guided the students into thinking about why this problem exists. Utilizing the 'But Why' activity (an exercise used as part of the 'why' stage of the social action process) and additional discussion, the students decided to tackle 'teenagers on the street after school is a problem because they have nowhere safe to go and they are bored.' The idea of a youth-run youth centre was born, and although I did my best to encourage them to take on a smaller project, they were now united and determined. They signed a pledge to commit to the project and I felt like I signed my life away.

From elective course to full day project class

This class is different because in Youth Dreamers we are making change in the community. [Chekana]

During the year and four months as an elective course, I couldn't help but notice the tremendous number of skills the students were learning and applying. Students were enthusiastically writing business proposals, letters of Inquiry to foundations, grants, and budgets. They were planning and executing presentations, making site visits to interview directors of other youth centres

and organizing meetings of adults and youth. They were planning fundraisers, evaluating them and calculating their profit. It was a thrill to see the real world connections and application of skills from other classes that these students were showing everyday. But there was never enough time at the end of the day and I was tired of always meeting after school. This was real learning that should be given more place in the daily schedule. I had to speak to the staff. This had to be more than an elective class. But would they agree? And how would we do it?

Fortunately, I work in a 'New School Initiative' school in Baltimore City. This is a Baltimore City Public School run by teachers, parents, community members and students. While we are constrained by the city budget and city and state testing mandates, we are able to write our own curriculum, create our own schedules, determine our own class sizes, etc. When I spoke to the staff about what I had observed in my elective course, they were enthusiastic about taking that class to a different level and taking other projects in the school to that level, too.

Project class

I am part of the Youth Dreamers because we are doing big things together and we're helping people. Also because it seemed fun. [Shanta]

So, September 2002 rolled around and we were now a fully-fledged, all day Youth Dreamers Project Class, with 18 students instead of the original nine. Our day was structured, but full of choice. We began with announcements and from these a list would develop of mini-projects to be completed. Perhaps we needed to do another fundraiser, or research needed to be done to find more grants, or a new grant could have come to our attention, or we could have found out that we were invited to present our work at a community meeting. After announcements, students would decide what they would work on, who they would work with and when they would work. We built in snack breaks, enjoyed a longer lunch period with the whole school, and rounded out our day by coming back together to report on what we had accomplished and set goals for the next class period. The last piece would always be self-

evaluation (described later). Occasionally, I would present a mini-lesson on a skill or piece of content that I noted they needed help with, such as business letter form, grant writing, how to speak on the telephone, etc. In later years, as the class grows in size, 'older' Youth Dreamers will be able to take over the job of teaching these mini-lessons to newer members.

Grading

This class is different because you don't learn what most middle school students learn. It is different because you don't really get graded. [Sammy]

While this schedule suited our needs, it was still quite a challenge trying to keep everyone on task for most of the day. And going from a one hour elective class to a full day project class created additional challenges. At first I was concerned that being graded on their work would create a negative, pressure- filled situation that would take away from the sense of community and choice we had created. Fortunately, this did not happen. Students grade themselves on Leadership and Cooperation at the end of each day. I also have a chance to grade them on these outcomes. Students are very honest about their performance, and we find that usually my score matches their own self-assessment. At the end of each grading period, these scores are averaged by the students for their report cards.

There are consistent teacher-developed rubrics used for letter writing, grant writing, and presentations. I developed these rubrics after discussions and mini-lessons centred around these skills. There are standard report forms for fundraising and event planning. I developed these based on whole group reflections that happen after every fundraiser and event. Students are utilizing skills from core classes to accomplish numerous goals. They are understanding why business letter form is important and how to use their math skills to balance our cheque book and modify our budget. And as a full curriculum, connected explicitly to state and city outcomes and standards, I feel protected from people who want to question the validity of what I am doing in my classroom.

The transformation

I felt that the Youth Dreamers would be an organization where my voice would be heard and my opinion would be heard. [Chantel]

I noticed a phenomenal transformation in this class in comparison to my seventh grade English class. In my English class, students refused to write a short story, but in the Youth Dreamers, they would write 10 page grants. In my English class, I would come up with creative, interactive ways to teach how to address an envelope and notice that whenever they needed to do so, they were unable to do it correctly. Switch to the Youth Dreamers - when a student pulled me aside to ask how to address an envelope, I showed her once, she filled out the envelope that held the grant that went to the foundation, and I never had to show her again. In my English class, asking a student to revise a paper became an emotional disaster. In the Youth Dreamers, students would come to me to ask if they had left out any important information in their letter of inquiry to a foundation. When rejection letters rolled in and I prepared myself with Winston Churchill quotes—‘Success is nothing but failure after failure with undiminished enthusiasm’—the students would look at me and then ask, ‘So who should we write to next?’ This was an aberration from the classroom when they would fall apart if they did not receive a grade they expected on a paper.

In my English class, students would constantly bicker over trivial matters, fight for attention and rarely respect the contributions of others. In the Youth Dreamers, students would democratically decide who would get to be the one student who was interviewed on the morning news. As a class, they then decided to each write down their top three choices for a representative, and they tallied the votes to come up with one representative and a runner-up. These two students worked together to prepare for questions that might come their way. In addition, the students would recognize the strengths and contributions of others when deciding on mini-project groups.

At one point, I had students begging to be part of the Youth Dreamers, particularly students who did not typically work very hard in regular classes. One of my English Language /Arts students who did very little work in class asked if he could join. I responded

with, 'It's a lot of hard work and you don't do very much work in class.' He surprised me when he said, 'But Youth Dreamers is important. They're really doing something.' I didn't know whether to be upset at the notion that he thought we weren't really doing 'something' in English class, or thrilled at the realization that he saw the Youth Dreamers as a group of students taking responsibility for making positive change in their world.

Individual students in the Youth Dreamers were baffling me. Tenika was failing all of her other classes but was the leader in the Youth Dreamers, organizing and running fundraisers, starting a group to plan and run the Talent Show, writing a 5 page grant to have a block party in the community. Students were begging to stay after school in order to plan a presentation. Instead of bemoaning the school-wide Halloween party that only raised \$5.00 for the Youth Dreamers, we decided during our reflections that it showed what good planners they were and that they could organize and control a whole student body on a holiday. We moved it from the Fundraising part of our budget and included it in reports for funders to show these strengths. Again, attitude seemed to evaporate and enthusiasm took its place. I stayed up nights wondering: What is happening here? Why is it happening here? Why isn't it happening in my English Language /Arts class? Is it going to go away? Should I not talk about it for fear of it going away? Should I ask them about it? Is it just a case of luck or magic? I was constantly pondering these questions to help me better understand the effects of social action and what I was doing 'wrong' in my regular classroom.

The classroom vs. the social action project embedded in the classroom

How do you get them to do all that work? [Teachers]

I don't. They do. When I first began the elective course, I invited students to join the class to 'make change in their world.' They came to the class by choice. This is very different from how students come to my English class, who attend because they are forced to be there. They are learning what is prescribed by the

city, not necessarily what they want to learn. For the most part, I am teaching what I am told to teach, not what I can see they need to learn.

In the Youth Dreamers, I used the social action process in its true sense to guide them. They came up with the issues, they brainstormed why the problem exists, they decided how they were going to address it, they take action and they reflect on almost every step along the way. Unlike my traditional classroom where students have little control of their own learning, the Youth Dreamers have total ownership of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

The climate of the classroom has changed from traditional teaching (even though I consider myself to be an untraditional teacher) to working on a social action project as a team. The only time I am teaching in the traditional sense is when I am presenting a mini-lesson in reaction to their needs. At all other times, students are choosing what to work on, who to work with and how to best accomplish the task at hand. In response, students have begun to perceive Wednesdays in a very different way. They speak about it as a 'fun day,' even though they are doing more work on that day and they are still being graded on it. According to a survey given in March 2002, 80% of the Youth Dreamers surveyed responded that they learned more and completed more work in this class than in other classes. In addition, of thirty skills listed, they identified learning 70% as a Youth Dreamer, 3% in other classes, and 27% in both Youth Dreamers and other classes.

My role

Ms. Kristina don't tell us what to do. We do it with our own free will.
[Chris]

As the facilitator of the Youth Dreamers, I wear the hat of a social action worker, using the skills I have as a teacher to help facilitate a student-chosen goal. I am no longer seen as their teacher, but more as their guide and a resource. I enjoy being able to float through the classroom to help with particular questions or general needs. I am able to create mini-lessons based on real needs (such as how

to write a business letter or address an envelope), rather than what I think are real needs. This often makes me reactive, rather than proactive, which is not how I am used to teaching.

As a worker, it is often the case of the blind leading the blind. I never know what will happen next, what direction the students will choose to go, or how they will handle the next challenge. This can be a very uncomfortable position to be in because you feel a real lack of control. But the structure of our days, the goals we have in common, and the desire to see a dream become a reality bring self-control to the classroom. The students perceive me as peripheral in the project. When asked what the role of the adult ally is in the group, the students responded, 'Well, we really do everything. She just organizes our thoughts on chart paper around the room.' I was both thrilled and disappointed with this response. After all, I do a bit more than serve as their scribe, BUT I am pleased to see that they are confident knowing that they really are in charge of their project.

I struggled for a long time about the difference between what was happening in my English class and my role there, with what was happening in the Youth Dreamers and my role there. After much reflection and discussion, it has become very apparent to me that being a teacher and being a social action worker are not the same. The principles and process of social action do not align perfectly with teaching because teaching is not about bringing a group with common issues together to make change. Teaching and social action may share philosophies/principles and they may be influenced by one another, but they are not the same.

On Wednesdays, I am a social action worker working in the confines of a classroom. I use my skills as a teacher to provide mini-lessons and guidance and grading is injected. I am working with a group of students with a shared goal. The rest of the week, I am a teacher, guided by the principles of social action and good teaching, incorporating those theories into my practice. I am working with a group of students with very different needs, no common goal, and a required curriculum. So I just keep both hats in the closet and make costume changes every now and then.

My struggles

You spend entirely too much time with your students. [a friend]

As a facilitator and not a teacher, I feel that I sometimes lack credibility among my colleagues. My guidance has come into question because people assume that these students are just making all kinds of decisions on their own. On the contrary, students do a tremendous amount of research, make decisions collectively with adults they bring in to help, and are never just allowed to do something without planning. I have a responsibility as their teacher to maintain a safe and secure environment, which means I monitor, participate, guide, and sometimes obstruct. I struggle with how much guidance to give them, whether to give input about direction, and how to deal with having to tell them that their choice may not be an appropriate option. And because I often don't know what is around the corner, I can't prepare myself for anything. I have made mistakes, but have grown much more comfortable admitting to other adults that I need help from them.

While there are those who are willing to help, there are also those adults who either refuse to believe that this project is youth driven, refuse to believe that it can happen because it is youth-run, don't follow through on their promises, or ask for a one-year operating costs budget the next day. When Senator Mikulski was considering funding the project, her projects director wanted to meet with me, not the students. Against my better judgement, I attended the 10 minute meeting alone, laden with photographs and work that the students had done. She had no interest in my 'evidence,' she just wanted to know about our demographics and test scores. When larger foundations are approached by the students, they are often unwilling to even consider that the project is possible because it is youth-run. At a Housing Meeting with adult allies from the community, students asked for help in finding a building and finding someone to take title to it. The adults set tasks to be completed by the next meeting and then did not even show up at that meeting where the Youth Dreamers presented all the research they had completed in the interim. Writing a one-year operating costs budget took the students weeks, not the day in which it was expected. Adults do not understand that time frames for students

are very different from time frames for adults. And given the role that I have chosen, I simply cannot just do it for them in order to have it turned in on time. Fortunately, these struggles end up being more of my burden than a burden on the students. They tend to chalk it up to another adult not believing in them and then they move on to the next task that will take them further to accomplishing their goal.

Although I am more of a social action worker in this role, the teacher in me often wants to jump in and ‘fix’ things or just ‘finish’ them on time. But I have learned that the most valuable lessons come from students fixing and finishing themselves. Figuring out that the riot at the entrance to the Benefit Basketball Game could be avoided by having two students, instead of one, standing in front of the door blocked by a table is much more valuable coming from them instead of me. Choosing to finish a grant in the eleventh hour, rather than giving up on it because of the time constraint, really taught Tenika that leaving things to the last minute can be an uncomfortable, unenjoyable situation. But she did it, bragged to everyone else, and then received the money.

Finally, I struggle tremendously with time. Initially, I was thrilled at the prospect of having a full day with the Youth Dreamers. We would finally have enough time to get things done without having to meet in the afternoons and on weekends. My life had become the Youth Dreamers and I was looking forward to returning to a more balanced lifestyle. The reality is that there is still not enough time and my life is still not my own. The students are constantly working to meet deadlines. Teaching three classes on top of managing the Youth Dreamers has become totally overwhelming. Getting students to presentations and meetings outside of school involves getting coverage for my classes or working late into the evenings and/or on weekends. While I have tried to delegate some of my duties to our adult allies, they are often unavailable because of their own busy schedules. There have been times when I just wanted to run away screaming when a student suggested meeting on another Saturday. But having begun this project with them two years ago, I have never felt that I could just walk away. If they are willing to sacrifice a Saturday, shouldn’t I be willing to do the same? This is something I still struggle with, something that I

know needs to change; I just don't know quite how to change it.

And I struggle with additional questions: Is it always going to be the blind leading the blind? Am I qualified to deal with what is lurking around the corner? Are they focusing too much on this goal by spending all these additional hours working on it? How is this perceived by the school and our community? What in the world is going to happen when they actually get this centre opened? Then what will happen to my life? Will we be able to successfully run this youth centre the way we have successfully worked towards the goal?

Their struggles

A lot of adults think our project is 'cute.' They don't really believe that we are doing all of the hard work to accomplish our goal. [Astarte]

The students face their own set of challenges and struggles. I hear their complaints during class time and I saw their frustrations on paper when they completed the survey in March 2002. They have been discouraged by the attitude of adults who don't take them seriously because they are youth: 'Youth really have talent! You just need to develop it.' They are frustrated by the media's portrayal of youth: 'The newspaper and TV talk about bad stuff too much. They need to see the positive sides of Baltimore.' They often have trouble staying on task and get irritated when students don't do their part: 'The most frustrating thing is people not doing their job as a Youth Dreamer.' Although they respond by writing more letters, students are frustrated 'when we write letters to people and they don't write back.' They, too, feel the effects of how much time this project has taken: 'The thing that frustrated me was that things didn't happen right away. It took some time in school and after school. It seemed like we were going nowhere.' Many have had trouble staying committed to the goal, while others have never strayed: 'I have learned the importance of commitment and that all of us is better than doing it yourself.' The lessons learned seem to overpower the frustrations, as expressed by Chekana, 'If you really want to do it, then do it. Don't give up. You may come

across rejections, but keep going, never stop.'

But in the end it works for us because

Being so immersed in this project has made it difficult for me to step back and view what is happening in an objective way. Although blurred by all these questions that swirl about in my head and the struggles I see the students grappling with, what I do see is very clear ... I see the smile on Cierra's face when she found out that she had secured \$20,240 worth of funding from a grant she wrote. I also see her mother bragging to a community member at our festival about how hard her daughter is working towards this dream. I see Tenika walking around the classroom with a huge grin after faxing her four page grant taunting, 'What did you do today? Anything? I wrote an entire grant.' I see Sammy after a presentation/skit for 30 bankers interested in reinvesting in the community being asked, 'So, were you at the meeting with the developer who might donate a house to your organization?' To which he replied, 'I wrote him the letter, planned the meeting, and ran it.' I see Astarte running into the room breathless after a call to the Senator exclaiming, 'The bill is on the President's desk. He is going to sign it!' I see Rebecca and Tiye running into the classroom after convincing an elementary school principal to allow them to tutor her students who will soon be members of our centre, 'She's letting us come on Wednesday afternoons, and she was so impressed with our proposal ... everyone was asking us if we wrote it!' I see Astarte and Chris waiting on their doorsteps at 3:15 am so they can help open the school and setup for the Angel Soft Media Blitz. I see Chris arm in arm with Jane Kaczmarek from *Malcolm in the Middle* walking through the classroom pointing out all of the work the Youth Dreamers have done. I see Shani sitting on a board of adults and youth helping to decide which after school programs should get funding in the city. I see adults and youth sitting around a table adjusting by-laws so that they don't read President and Chairperson, but instead President and Youth President. I see the shock on Nathan's face when we get to Walmart only to be presented with an overflowing shopping

cart of toys and craft supplies because of a letter he wrote to five corporate officials. I see Chris, Mildred, Chantel, and myself on the other side of the table, now serving as Youth As Resources Board members, not youth coming to them for money. I see Jade smiling and sighing with relief after presenting her first workshop to middle school students. I see the look of shock on Chekana's face when the Youth Dreamers were presented with a Resolution from the Baltimore City Council after their own presentation. I see 16 students showing up for a meeting in the middle of the summer, enthusiastic about setting goals for the new year. I see youth who have accomplished more at age 13 than many will accomplish in a lifetime. I see youth who have a ticket to college having written letters and grants; been interviewed on TV and the radio; presented at major universities and in front of numerous groups of adults; researched and started their own non-profit organization; and organized, planned, and run their own community block party. I see youth who are stakeholders in their community, and hopefully, will come back to serve their community in the future. I see youth who believe in their project and its lasting effects: 'Because of our project, I would like to see less youth on the corner and more youth going to college and being successful.'

Ultimately, I see a group of students who embody the principles of social action because they believe that they:

- Have the skills, experience, and understanding that they can draw on to tackle problems they face;
- Have the right to be heard, define the issues facing them, and take action on their own behalf;
- Can work collectively and have power; and
- Can make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues.

The most exciting part of this project has been seeing the things we want to happen actually happen. [Shanta]